BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE SOVIET FUTURE

"Homeland of patience" was the 19th-century Russian poet Fedor Tiutchev's sorrowful epithet for his country. As Berkeley historian Nicholas V. Riasanovsky explains in **A History of Russia** (Oxford, 1963; 3rd ed., 1977), the Russians have patiently endured invasion, isolation, and a backward economy. Looking West, Russia's rulers have repeatedly sought to catch up with Europe, "whether by means of Peter the Great's reforms or the [Soviet] Five-Year Plans."

Peter the Great (1672–1725), the father of modern Russia, set up technical schools; sent Russians abroad to study science, mathematics, and engineering; and himself toured Western Europe, sometimes in disguise.

Under Peter, Russia's foreign trade quadrupled, enabling him to build a European-style Army and Navy and to wage interminable wars. Thanks to his military outlays, asserts Riasanovsky, Russia remained at the end of the 18th century a poor, backward land, weighed down by "a large and glorious army" and a huge, complex bureaucracy.

It was not until Russia's shattering defeat by Turkey, Britain, and France in the Crimean War (1853–56) that large-scale borrowing of Western technology by Russian entrepreneurs began. The state encouraged industrial development. During the 1890s, the Ministry of Finance, directed by Count Sergei Witte, subsidized heavy industry by curtailing imports, balancing the budget, and introducing the gold standard. Yet Witte's approaches were inherently contradictory, argues Clark University historian Theodore Von Laue in **Sergei Witte and the Industrialization of Russia** (Columbia, 1963, cloth; Atheneum, 1969, paper). The independence and spontaneity essential to entrepreneurial capitalism were incompatible with the long tsarist tradition of government initiative and control.

The Bolsheviks who led the revolution of October 1917 did not stray far from that tradition. But during the first years of the communist state, their hopes for economic revitalization were set back by civil war, drought, famine, and epidemic disease. In **An Economic History of the USSR** (Penguin, 1972, paper only), University of Glasgow economist Alex Nove quotes Lenin's confession of the time: "Such is the sad state of our decrees; they are signed and then we ourselves forget about them and fail to carry them out."

Faced with social and economic breakdown, Lenin in 1921 introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP), under which the Bolsheviks abandoned extreme centralization in favor of a mixed economy. The state then controlled only the "commanding heights" of the economy (iron, steel, electricity, transportation, and foreign trade). Much retail trade and almost all farming reverted to the private sector. Taxes replaced requisitions; technical experts and foreign capital were brought in from abroad. In **Western Technology and Soviet Economic Development, 1917–30** (Hoover, 1968), Antony Sutton lists more than 200 firms that entered the USSR as "concessionaires" in the

1920s, among them Alcoa, Gillette, International Harvester, and Singer Sewing Machine.

NEP warded off disaster. But it came to an end in 1927, when Joseph Stalin outmaneuvered his competitors, gained total control of the Communist Party, and introduced the First Five-Year Plan. In **Planning for Economic Growth in the Soviet Union, 1918–1932** and **Stalinist Planning for Economic Growth, 1933–1952** (Univ. of N.C., 1971 and 1980, respectively), Eugène Zaleski, director of research at the National Center of Scientific Research in Paris, examines the Stalinist drive toward industrialization. His conclusion: The central national plan was—and is—a "myth," a "vision of the future." In reality, he contends, Soviet economic policy consists of "an endless number of plans, constantly evolving, that are coordinated . . . after they have been put into operation."

Stalin went on to rule the USSR for a quarter of a century. In the West, at least, he is best remembered for his murderous repression. In **The Great Terror: Stalin's Purges of the Thirties** (Macmillan, 1968; rev. ed., 1973, cloth & paper), Kremlinologist and poet Robert Conquest estimates that 20 to 30 million people perished during the Stalinist period.

Millions more were sentenced to long terms in the labor camps—"the Gulag archipelago," in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's memorable phrase. The Nobel Prize–winning novelist's first work, **One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich** (translated by Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley; Praeger, 1963, cloth & paper), portrays one Gulag prisoner's battle against hunger, cold, and despair.

Russia suffered terribly when the Nazis invaded in the summer of 1941, not least because half of the Red Army's senior officers had been purged and shot or imprisoned on Stalin's orders. Stalin's vast Army seemed to melt away as German forces pushed to the suburbs of Moscow and began the 900-day siege of Leningrad. Alexander Werth, Moscow correspondent for the *London Sunday Times* during World War II, presents a highly sympathetic account of the Red Army's retreat and resurgence in **Russia at War, 1941–1945** (Dutton, 1964, cloth; Avon, 1964, paper).

Germany's defeat left the USSR dominant in Eastern Europe, where local Communists soon set up Soviet-style regimes—and Soviet-style economies. Moscow orchestrated Comecon, the East's version of the Common Market, and the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet answer to NATO. Yet socialist economic cooperation could be rather lopsided: At one point, the foreign trade ministers of Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia were executed for haggling too hard with the Soviet Union. Former White House aide Zbigniew Brezinski comprehensively examines USSR–Eastern European relations in **The Soviet Bloc: Unity and Conflict** (Harvard, 1960; rev. ed., 1967, cloth & paper).

Stalin finally died in 1953. In **Stalin: The Man and His Era** (Viking, 1973), Adam Ulam, professor of government at Harvard, likens the dictator's last years to "a tale by Kafka, with an occasional scene that seems to come from the chronicle of gangland warfare in Al Capone's era." Yet, under Stalin's leadership, the Soviet Union became one of the world's Big Two military powers.

Looking at today's USSR in **The Soviet System of Government** (Univ. of Chicago, 1957; 5th ed., 1980, cloth & paper), Columbia University law professor John Hazard argues that

"Stalinism is not dead, but muted." The Soviet Union's present rulers, he adds, are governed by a "determination to avoid change."

If that is indeed their aim, they have in the last few years been successful. Since Nikita Khrushchev's ouster in 1964, the Soviet people have enjoyed what has been, by Russian standards, a period of remarkable calm.

In recent years, two noted American newsmen have set out to describe Soviet life in the Brezhnev era. In **The Russians** (Quadrangle, 1976, cloth; Ballantine, 1977, paper), the *New York Times*'s Hedrick Smith mentions a particularly jarring example of official conservatism: *Goskontsert*, the state booking agency, regularly imposes quotas on Soviet popular bands—15 percent Western music, 20 percent Eastern European, and 65 percent Soviet. *Washington Post* correspondent Robert Kaiser suggests, in **Russia: The People and the Power** (Atheneum, 1976, cloth; Pocket Books, 1980, paper), that the Soviet system is "efficient" in the broadest sense: Through the centralized allocation of resources, Soviet leaders are able to "use what they have to get what they want."

A good deal more thorough is **Soviet Economy in a Time of Change** (Government Printing Office, 1979), a two-volume anthology prepared by 79 scholars and government analysts for the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress. In 58 densely documented articles, the specialists examine Soviet successes (in oil production, for instance) and setbacks (most notably in agriculture) during the 1970s.

Time alone will soon bring changes to the Kremlin. Seweryn Bialer calculates in **Stalin's Successors: Leadership, Stability, and Change in the Soviet Union** (Cambridge, 1980) that, in 1952, the average age of Politburo members was 55.4 years, while in 1980 it was 70.1.

Bialer, a Columbia University political scientist, warns that Brezhnev's successors *might* be "seriously shaken" in the 1980s, despite the apparent stability of the communist regime. Derived less from tradition than from political controls, that stability rests on a very narrow base of popular support. As Bialer sees it, the present-day Soviet political system resembles the 19th-century potato diet of Ireland. And he quotes Cambridge historian George M. Trevelyan, who wrote: "The potato is the easiest method of supporting life at a very low standard—until a year comes when the crop completely fails."

—Barbara Ann Chotiner

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Ms. Chotiner is assistant professor of political science at the University of Alabama, where she is currently writing a book on the 1962 reorganization of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.*